Historical Musings

"Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are": Professional Historians and Local History

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This essay is a rumination about local history. Specifically, it considers why professional academic historians have generally lost a commitment to doing the history of the places where they live. It also examines the consequences of that loss to them and to their communities. In thinking about this issue, I frequently recalled the words of the great African-American educator Booker T. Washington, who admonished his people to "cast down your bucket where you are." There was great wisdom in that remark, and professional historians can still derive great benefit from attending to it.

I started thinking seriously about the state of local history just a few years ago. The Minnesota Historical Society has nearly \$30 million to develop an interpretive center at Saint Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, a spot on the Mississippi River where forceful water and erodable limestone conspire to create what passes for a cataract in the Upper Midwest. It was here that shrewd entrepreneurs built the facilities that ultimately created Minneapolis and made it the wheat-flour miller to the world.

The Minnesota Historical Society is understandably eager to draw maximum attention to its ambitious plans for the falls. Among other promotional efforts, the society recently published a special issue of its quarterly journal, *Minnesota History*, on the historical meaning and

I. Washington used this expression numerous times, most notably in his famous "Atlanta Compromise" address of 1895. See Washington, Up from Slavery: An Autobiography (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1901), pp. 31–36.

significance of Saint Anthony Falls. In the fall of 2000, the editors asked me to write the lead article.²

I cherish the opportunity to contribute to a quality journal like *Minnesota History* on such a significant subject. It struck me as curious, however, that someone from North Dakota State University, in Fargo, would be approached to write the introductory essay on a place that was crucial to the development of Minneapolis and, indeed, the whole state and region. Not wanting to offend any scholars with local specialties, I asked the editors whether someone at the University of Minnesota might be a better choice, only to be told, "Nobody at the U of M does local history anymore."

I did not believe this assertion could be true, and an investigation of the university history department's web site confirmed that it was not. Among the forty-six historians listed, there was a lot of local history being done. People were doing the local history of Peru and Rwanda, of New Caledonia and Yemen, of Montpelier, France, and Natick, Massachusetts. In all, University of Minnesota faculty members listed 103 fields in which they claimed expertise. Neither the history of Minnesota, nor the history of Minnesota, nor the history of Minnesota. This situation led me to wonder why there is little or no history of the local community and the state being done in American universities these days, especially at elite institutions such as the University of Minnesota.

It hasn't always been this way. For a long time, talented scholars at leading universities did the local history of the places where their institutions were located. People like Samuel Eliot Morison and Perry Miller at Harvard and Merle E. Curti at Wisconsin produced spectacular, seminal works on the forces that had shaped their states and regions—and not just because those states and regions were so intrinsically important that they compelled the attention of brilliant historians. In recent years, scholars of the colonial Chesapeake have taught us many things, among the most important of which is that Massachusetts Bay is not as special as we used to think. Massachusetts Bay

^{2.} David B. Danbom, "Flour Power: The Significance of Flour Milling at the Falls," Mindesolat History 58 (Spring 'Cummer 2003): 270-85

was important, in part, because Morison and Miller and their students were so attentive to it. Similarly, Wisconsin became a significant state in American historiography at least in part because Merle Curti and his colleagues and students at Madison made it so.³

This state of affairs changed not because the possibilities for productive locally oriented scholarship diminished, but because the profession changed. By the 1960s, for instance, historians' expectations regarding career paths had undergone a transformation. Young men and women with terminal degrees no longer took jobs with the idea of settling down at an institution and in a community for life. The growing staffs of colleges and universities and the explosion in student numbers as the baby-boom generation matured encouraged talented people to think in terms of climbing the academic ladder. As a consequence, professional historians devised research strategies with mobility in mind.

Ambitious professionals realized that one did not move up the career ladder by doing local history. What one did was to publish his or her dissertation—which was viewed, increasingly, as a first book rather than an exercise demonstrating that one could handle history—and then elaborate on that work. This task was usually easy enough, because it's a damned poor dissertation that doesn't create a vacuum the author can spend his or her life trying to fill. Then, too, there was the problem that if one did local history, he or she would be severed from those precious local sources when the call came from some other, more attractive institution. It was just safer not to touch those local topics.

The growing affluence and technological sophistication of the United States and of American higher education pushed professionals further away from local history. Reduced teaching loads and liberal leave policies gave them more time for all kinds of research. Foundation and government grants facilitated their ability to travel to distant repositories and to acquire sources. Modern communication allowed

^{3.} See, for example, Morison, Builders of the Bay Colony (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1930); Miller, Errand into the Wilderness (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956); and Curti, The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of D normally is a Frontier County (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford, University Press, 1977)

them to create and maintain national and international communities of scholars who shared their esoteric interests. Ironically, someone doing the local history of Rwanda or Yemen at the University of Minnesota today can have richer interactions with scholars regarding his or her topic than I can have doing the history of Fargo at North Dakota State University.

Clearly, the big change the profession of history underwent was not positive for local history. When I came to North Dakota State University in 1974, our two emeritus professors were William C. Hunter and Rudolf Otterson, both of whom had come to Fargo from the University of Wisconsin in the mid-1920s. Both men became part of the local community, and both did local history. Otterson taught North Dakota history, and Hunter, who had been trained as a Europeanist, had written two books—a history of North Dakota State University and a history of the Fargo Rotary Club. These men were deeply respected by alumni who remembered their courses fondly and by the community, but neither was known outside of the local area.

In 1974, however, the department's stars no longer did local history. We did the history of Korea and Ireland and big, national movements in the United States—the types of things most of us still do. North Dakota history was still taught, but the faculty did not cherish the course. It was viewed as an albatross to be hung around the necks of the untalented or those without seniority, and it was a potential career-killer if one devoted too much time to it.

In fact, the demise of local history in our department and in others was not completely a bad thing. Local history could be, and frequently was, history that was badly done, or history that could not meet more exacting standards than those set by forgiving friends in states and localities. For every Merle Curti or Perry Miller who viewed local developments through the lenses of national and international scholarship, there were three or four William C. Hunters who viewed localities narrowly, in their own terms, and who frequently lost their objectivity, becoming cheerleaders rather than neutral and skeptical observers of historical phenomena. Hunter was pitied and sometimes disdained because his connection to his topics led him to ignore flaws such as bigotry in the Rotary and violations of academic freedom at the uni-

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versity. In the end, he betrayed the canons of the discipline and violated that old admonition against conflict of interest that comes from journalism: You can't cover the circus when you're sleeping with the elephants.

Moreover, historians' quests for broader histories in more far-flung places has been good for our universities. Students in Fargo, in common with those in Brookings and Vermillion, South Dakota, and every other place in the United States with a college, are going to be part of an increasingly diverse nation and a smaller world. Anything universities can do to broaden their horizons is all to the good.

Finally, if history is mainly about human nature, conflicts, relationships, and institutions, which I think it is, then the lives of humans in Natick, Massachusetts, or in New Caledonia can tell us about as much as the lives of people in our own cities and states. If we can convey the basic human story while advancing our careers, where lies the harm?

The harm, I think, is that in the process of changing their discipline, professional historians disconnected too completely from local history. When that happened, they disconnected from local people.

Even though professionals lost interest in local history, the public did not. We have been reminded of that fact lately, especially by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in *The Presence of the Past*, a study of how history is applied on a popular level in the United States. When one considers visits to historical sites and museums, or the vitality of local historical societies, or the number of people who pore over census manuscripts and city directories and old newspapers in every college and public library in the land, it becomes abundantly clear that there are lots of local people interested in history.4

These lay historians used to be interested in the same topics professional historians were, but when we look closely at the two groups we can see that a wide chasm has opened in the years since most professionals decided to opt out of local history. Lay historians generally like military history more than professionals do, for example. They are interested in tracing their roots, from the old country to brave pioneer

^{4.} See Rosenzweig and Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

forebearers to grandma and grandpa and mom and dad. They seem not to think much about issues of race and gender and class, at least not in the way professionals have come to. They are drawn more to material things than to ideas, and they like their ideas simple and undeconstructed. They tend to see history as a set of clear facts and truths, not as a field of ambiguity, contingency, nuance, and contestation. Finally, their interest in history is intimately related to their need to construct or reinforce an identity. Professional historians like to justify their work by saying that one must know history if one is to know himself or herself, but the professional means something different by that expression than does the person looking for grandpa's farm on the county plat map.

One of the things that is unique about history, as Rosenzweig and Thelen remind us, is that it is a genuinely popular discipline. Virtually everyone has a memory and an interest in his or her past, and most people believe that they are at least partially products of their experiences. It is quite literally true that every sentient person is, as Carl L. Becker once suggested, his or her own historian. The fascination we have with the past, with its human drama, and with how it has shaped us, explains why we have local historical societies but not local physics societies, why many common, everyday people read history but not sociology, and why there is a History Channel but no accounting channel.

Now, the popularity of history is a good thing for professional historians. Indeed, it is much more important for the health of the discipline than professionals realize or would generally concede. The fact that so many people believe the past is relevant to the present is one of the reasons history as an academic discipline has kept from drifting into irrelevance in the same way philosophy has in our relentlessly practical society.

The problem is that the interest of lay people in history seemed at times to hold the discipline back. Academic historians, especially after World War II, hoped to professionalize the discipline, making it a true

^{5.} Becker's "Everyman His Own Historian" was his presidential address to the American Historical Association, delivered at Minneapolis in 1931. It is reprinted in his Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1935).

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social science. The process of professionalization involved talking and writing about places and phenomena that were strange to lay historians, doing so in an analytical rather than a narrative manner, and developing a jargon that limited the accessibility of professional scholarship. The process through which professional historians passed is similar to that through which agricultural scientists passed early in the last century. In 1900, scientists in land-grant colleges and experiment stations focused on addressing the practical, day-to-day problems farmers confronted. That approach made them and their institutions popular with local folks, but it prevented them from being accepted as genuine scientists by snooty biologists, chemists, and physicists. Their answer was to emphasize basic scientific research and leave the practical problems to a new cadre of extension personnel.

Academic historians gradually disengaged from the local folk as well, but they did not have the luxury of history county agents to maintain local contacts. This disengagement worked to a large extent, and it was positive for the professional stature of historians. They are generally accepted in the community of professional social scientists; they play a role in national and international scholarly circles; and they no longer seek validation or support from the lay community.

The problem was that when academics disengaged from lay historians, they moved along one track, while nonprofessional historians moved along another, and those tracks increasingly diverged. The degree to which they diverged became evident in 1994 with the controversy over the National History Standards. The standards were a product of the Goals 2000 program, announced in 1990 by the first President George Bush as the centerpiece of his effort to improve the abysmal performance of American public education. The idea was to have sets of standards in English, mathematics, science, geography, and history that students throughout the nation would be expected to meet in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. If the states agreed to participate in the voluntary testing program, it would be possible to compare the abilities of South Dakota eighth graders in geography, for example, with their counterparts in Connecticut and Alabama. Presumably, officials and educators in every state would strive to improve student performance.

Developing the standards in each field, which consisted mainly of competencies that should be mastered but also of facts that should be known, was the job of professional groups and organizations. The National History Standards were written by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles, headed by respected American historian Gary Nash and supported by grants totaling nearly \$1.4 million from the United States Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

When the National History Standards appeared late in 1994, they became the center of a firestorm of criticism. Conservatives, especially, damned them for their "politically correct" attention to the experiences of African Americans, women, and other understudied groups, for their neglect of American heroes like Paul Revere and Thomas Edison, and for their allegedly excessive attention to flaws in the American past such as slavery and McCarthyism. Caught up in the vicious politics of the day, the standards were repudiated by the United States Senate in January 1995 by a stunning vote of 99 to 0.

This unhappy episode demonstrated many things, among the most significant of which was the degree to which academic historians had lost touch with the public. The Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association defended the standards, but nonprofessional historians were nowhere to be seen. Nash professed amazement at how the standards were received, in part because he and his team had consulted with more than two hundred organizations across the political spectrum. He might not have been so surprised had he talked to the Brown County Historical Society in South Dakota or to the insurance salesman reading microfilm in the public library to figure out when his grandfather arrived from Germany.

The first reaction of many professional historians to the repudiation of the standards was to blame the public for its backwardness, its inability or unwillingness to grasp the revolution that social history had effected in the discipline, and its insensitivity to issues of gender, race, and class. They were right. A major gulf separates lay and professional understandings of history, but it is not the nonprofessional devotees of history who are to blame. It is the responsibility of academic histo-

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rians to engage interested local people in terms they understand and on grounds with which they are familiar, to inform them where the academic side of the discipline is going, and to show them that what professional historians are talking about is as significant to their identities as grandpa's homestead patent and dad's World War II ribbons.

For the past decade, I have been working on a history of Fargo during the Great Depression. In the course of that project I have had numerous opportunities to talk with people interested in Fargo's history, both individually and in groups ranging from Kiwanis clubs to adulteducation classes. I have no problem discussing issues such as gender and class with them, although race is a little tougher in a town where the union of a Norwegian and a Swede is considered a mixed marriage. My point, however, is that nobody has ever jumped up and accused me of political correctness when I have discussed restrictions on women in the job market or class conflict in the city. The truth is that academic historians sell local people short when they assume that an educated and intelligent public cannot understand or relate to what we do. That assumption is part and parcel of the disengagement of professional historians from the public, and the conflict over the National History Standards shows how hazardous disengagement has become for history as an academic discipline.

Professional historians need to rediscover local history and reconnect with the history-loving public, not just for the health of their discipline but also to improve the quality of their work. As premier Kansas historian James Claude Malin pointed out many years ago, local history does more than simply provide texture or examples for larger treatments—it sometimes makes us rethink our assumptions and our conclusions in a substantial way. Especially in a diverse and locally oriented country like the United States, each locality has a different story to tell. Sometimes those stories are highly significant in their own right. The Saint Anthony Falls story is a local Minnesota story. but it is absolutely central to the larger story of how the United States became the leading flour milling and exporting country in the world and its leading economic power in the late nineteenth century. John E. Miller's stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder are stories about De Smet,

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South Dakota, but they are also stories of rural life and American literature and the changing roles of women in society.⁶

I am also coming to believe that professional historians can do better histories of the places where they live than they can of places where they do not live. Not only do professional historians have the sort of sustained contact with and immersion in the sources that outsiders lack, but they also *know* the community and its culture in a way outsiders usually cannot. Look at the work Joseph A. Amato and his colleagues have done at the Center for Rural and Regional Studies at Southwest Minnesota State University on the area's agriculture, ethnicity, ecology, and rural life. How many scholars from outside southwestern Minnesota could know the area well enough to match those achievements?

Finally, my work in local history has helped make me a better teacher, one better able to make history come alive for students. Those in the newspaper business always look for a "local angle." When you can provide the local angle on the War of 1812 or the process of industrialization or the civil-rights movement, you will make those events come alive for students. Because most professional historians are mainly teachers, that accomplishment is by no means a small one.

A final reason to do local history is that it helps some academic historians fulfill their public-service function. For thirty-three of the last thirty-eight years, I have been connected to land-grant universities, either as a student or a teacher. When Justin Morrill conceived the land-grant college idea, he envisioned institutions in which faculty would do research, teach, and serve the public. The first two aims are fairly clear and easy for academic historians to understand. The third is not, and for that reason it is frequently ignored, not just by historians but by liberal-arts professionals generally. I think Morrill, and in-

^{6.} Malin's most significant work is The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History (Lawrence, Kans., 1947). Two of Miller's works of local history with broad applicability are Looking for History on Highway 14 (1993; reprint ed., Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2001), and Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

^{7.} Amato is both an advocate and a prolific practitioner of local history. His most recent book is *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

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stitutions such as the University of Wisconsin that took the land-grant ideal as seriously as they did the land-grant money, believed that all parts of the university should serve the public in accordance with their particular abilities. Doing local history and relating to local people is one of the ways in which land-grant historians can serve the public.

When Morrill and Booker T. Washington and the other land-grant pioneers emphasized public service, I think they were interested in more than simply assuring the public got a return on its investment. They also recognized that institutions connected to the public and faithfully serving the public would enjoy the support of the public—support that was necessary if these new and revolutionary institutions were to survive. Academic historians would all do well to take this point, whether they are connected to land-grant institutions or not. The controversy over the National History Standards illustrates the perils of professional disengagement from the public for history as a discipline. Doing local history is one way to reengage. It is time, indeed, to heed the wisdom of Booker T. Washington once again and cast down our buckets where we are.

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